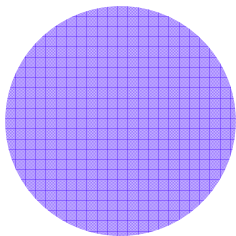
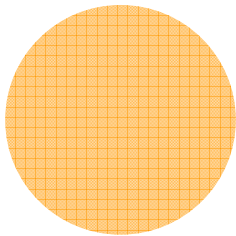
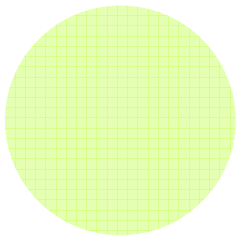




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Closing the Achievement Gap in Washington State: Holding Schools Accountable for Equity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The movement to reform education through standards and accountability has the potential to close the achievement gap, but it must be accompanied by a commitment at the state, district, and school levels to provide all students with equal access to the opportunity to learn. To close the achievement gap the state must not only hold schools accountable for the equitable distribution of requisite resources.

The Achievement Gap in Washington State

This report attempts to take a fresh look at the data from the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in order to provide practical information for both educators and policy makers.

Specifically, this analysis differs from most previous studies in that it uses scale scores rather than simply “percentage meeting standard;” analyzes data on both individual and building levels, since research has indicated that different groups of students perform quite differently in different educational settings; and displays the data in a number of different ways designed to clarify the nature and direction of the gaps that exist and their relationship to known demographic characteristics of students and their schools. Most reports of WASL scores only identify what proportion of students meet a standard. They do not distinguish students who are just below the standard from those far below it. Scale scores tell us, for students who did not meet the standard, whether they are close to or far from attaining it.

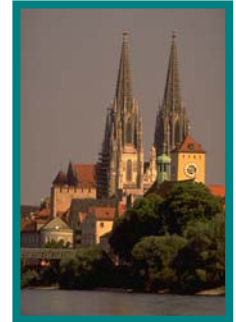
All 4th, 7th and 10th grade students tested in reading and math between 1998 and 2001 were included in this study of gaps in achievement among different groups of students in Washington State public schools. The most significant findings of this study include the following:



- The scores of white and Asian/Pacific Islander students are very similar across grades and subjects, while the scores of American Indian/Alaska Native, African American and Hispanic students follow a similar pattern. There are, in effect, two groups of students in the public schools: white/Asian and nonwhite (American Indian/Alaska Native, African American, and Hispanic.)
- The achievement gap between nonwhite and white/Asian students in Washington's public schools is significant by any measure. The difference in scale points on the WASL ranges from 24 to 38 points on average in mathematics and from 12 to 19 points in reading. These are considered medium to large gaps.
- The distribution of scale scores in math and reading indicate that nonwhite students peak at a lower point on the scale; in other words, a disproportionate number earn scores in the lower ranges of the scale. There is some evidence of a plateau effect just short of the cutoff point for meeting standard, especially at the 10th grade levels of testing.
- The increases in test scores observed so far have been modest for all racial groups, ranging from 3-7% in math and 2-3% in reading. Although nonwhite scores have increased slightly more than white/Asian scores over the four years of testing, the increases are far below that which is needed to close the gap. At this point, nonwhite math scores would have to increase by 11-19% and nonwhite reading scores would have to improve by 5-8% to match white/Asian scores and close the achievement gap.
- Students are not evenly distributed across school types in Washington State. Nonwhite students tend to be educated disproportionately in the polar ends of the locale distributions: either high poverty rural or small town settings or in high poverty big or midsize city areas. Over 75% of students in Washington public schools are white and most schools in the state are predominantly white, but nonwhite students are more likely to attend either majority nonwhite or mixed schools. In general, the achievement gaps are more pronounced in these majority nonwhite/mixed race schools. However, there is no clear pattern of cause-and-effect in building type or locale.

Additional individual and building-level data will be necessary to assess the contribution of various student and school factors to achievement and the achievement gap in Washington.

- Seventh grade test scores in both math and reading evidence anomalies that might have more to do with the test itself than with the students taking it. The pattern of achievement within both white/Asian and nonwhite students is different from (in some cases, radically different from) what would be expected given performance at both the 4th and 10th grade levels. These anomalies should be studied by testing experts to assess the source and effect of these differences.



Explaining the Achievement Gap: A Combination of Factors

A critical review of the national research literature reveals there is no simple explanation for the achievement gap; rather, a complex combination of home, school, and societal factors contribute to the gap.

Home Factors

Family financial attainment can explain some but not the entire achievement gap. More work is required to fully understand the influence of family income on student performance and disentangle the many associated factors. While not the definitive explanation of the achievement gap, role of poverty should nonetheless not be dismissed.

School Factors

The level and allocation of educational resources impacts student performance, particularly for low-income students and students of color. There are vast inequities in the distribution of educational resources, which result in disparities in student performance. This imbalance must be reviewed as one of the primary underpinnings of the achievement gap.

Funding

Despite efforts since the 1960's to address the financial inequalities inherent in school funding systems by making them less dependent on local wealth, school districts continue to be funded at different rates. Districts with the highest enrollments of low-income students and students of color have less money to spend per student than districts with the lowest enrollments of these student populations. Inequitable patterns of school funding exist both *across* districts and *within* districts.



Teacher Talent

Student achievement is directly affected by the quality of students' classroom teachers. Regardless of initial achievement level, students taught by experienced teachers perform better than those taught by inexperienced teachers. According to research in Tennessee, on average, the least effective teachers produce gains of about 14 percentile points among low-achieving students during a school year whereas the most effective teachers post gains among low-achieving students that average 53 percentile points. The effects of teachers, whether they hinder or promote achievement, are also long-lived and can be measured in subsequent student achievement scores.

The research on the distribution of teachers indicates the following:

- Low-income students and students of color are more likely to be taught by inexperienced, under-trained, and out-of-field teachers.
 - Twenty-two percent of teachers at low-income schools in California are not fully certified compared to 2 percent at high-income schools.
 - Thirty-three percent of teachers in California hold a Bachelor's degree or less at low-income schools in contrast to the only 9 percent of teachers at high-income schools.
 - Almost a third of social studies teachers in high-poverty schools, as opposed to 16 percent in low-poverty schools, do not have a major or a minor in social studies or a related discipline.
- Inequities in access to experienced and highly trained teachers among disadvantaged students exist *within* districts. Within a given district, schools with particularly disadvantaged students are likely to have less-educated and less-experienced teachers.
- Patterns of unequal access to quality teachers appear *within* schools. Not only do students in low-income and minority schools have less access to qualified teachers, but low-income and minority students, when attending affluent schools, also have less access to the best teachers.
- Schools that report difficulty attracting teachers, such as those found in rural and urban areas, are nearly twice as likely to have higher than average rates of teacher turnover. Teachers in schools with minority enrollments of 50 percent or more migrate at twice the rate of teachers in schools with relatively few minority students.

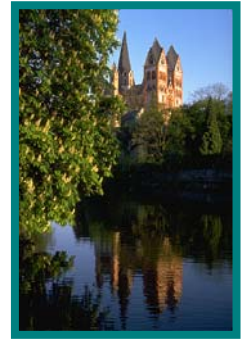


Academic Rigor

Academic achievement is directly related to challenging coursework. The number of rigorous courses a student takes has a positive effect on learning as measured by test scores. Nonetheless, schools fail to ensure all students, including students of color, English Language Learners (ELL) and low-income students, equal access to rigorous curricula.

Schools that serve low-income students and students of color are, on the whole, academically less rigorous. About one-third of high schools do not offer any advanced courses in science and another 28 percent offer advanced work only in one science subject, most commonly biology.

Even at schools with extensive advanced course offerings, students of color and low-income students are disproportionately under-represented in advanced classes. The mere presence of advanced courses does not guarantee that all students have access to a rigorous academic curriculum. Low-income students and students of color are not afforded access to the educational resources required for success.



Societal Factors

Prejudice and discrimination have long been significant sources of educational difference among racial and ethnic groups in the United States. These differences can be traced to a deeply ingrained and widely held belief that students of color are less able to succeed in school for either innate or cultural reasons. Prejudice contributes to educators' low academic expectations for students of color as well as students' own expectations of themselves.

Administrators, teachers, and students bring a host of ideological beliefs with them to school. These beliefs inform policy, behavior, and practice with in turn impact student performance. Closing the achievement gap necessitates a focus not only on the inequitable distribution of educational resources, but also on the complex ways that prejudice and discrimination infiltrate the learning process.



Washington: Equitable Access to Learning?

Low-income students and students of color in Washington State do not have equal access to the opportunity to learn. The educational resources required for success are not equally distributed.

- Districts with the highest child poverty rates and largest percentages of students of color have fewer state and local dollars to spend per student compared with districts with the lowest poverty rates and percentages of students of color.
- Low-income and minority students in Washington do not have equal access to well-prepared and qualified teachers. Thirty-two percent of classes in secondary schools with high percentages of



Low-income students are taught by teachers lacking a major in their field compared to 23 percent in schools with low percentages of low-income students. In schools with high percentages of students of color, 28 percent of classes are taught by teachers without a major in their field compared to 24 percent in schools with low percentages of students of color.

- Not all Washington students have equal access¹ to challenging coursework and effective instructional practices. Only 15 percent of African Americans, 15 percent of Native Americans, and 13 percent of Hispanics completed 8th grade algebra, a class that often functions as a gatekeeper to more advanced coursework. In contrast, 28 percent of white students and 31 percent of Asian students completed 8th grade algebra.

Closing the Achievement Gap

The achievement gap can be closed, but not with quick fixes. Closing the gap is a complex task that requires multiple, simultaneous, coherent, and long-term efforts that target school and societal issues. Responsibility may be shared by policymakers, educators, community leaders, parents and students. State policy should be designed with educational equity in mind from the start.

The following list identifies promising school strategies for closing the achievement gap.



1. Expand access to preschool.
2. Fund schools equitably by addressing inequities in funding between and within districts.
3. Staff low-performing schools with well-qualified and experienced teachers.
4. Ensure all students equal access to a challenging curriculum.
5. Reduce school and class sizes in low-performing schools.
6. Enhance state, district and school staff capacity for school improvement focused on equity.
7. Support research investigating the causes of and solutions to closing the achievement gap.

¹As argued by Finn, student course-taking reflects both “opportunities offered” by schools and “opportunities taken.” The courses a school offers delimits the courses students can take and thus what students can learn. Additionally, schools can limit the learning of students by discouraging them from enrolling in certain courses. Students may also limit their own learning by not taking advantage of the courses offered.

Holding Schools Accountable for Equity: Policy Implications

School accountability should be viewed as a reciprocal relationship; the state cannot simply demand performance from its schools and districts, but rather must provide them with the resources and freedom of action so they can improve instruction. The following recommendations identify key features of an equity-centered system of school accountability.

1. Produce and use data in ways that increase awareness of persistent low achievement.
2. Measure improvement and growth over time.
3. Measure gaps in achievement as well as changes in overall achievement.
4. Ensure that the conditions for teaching and learning are present and students have equal opportunity to master high standards.
5. Help educators improve instruction.
6. Design a system of comprehensive support and assistance for low-performing schools.
7. Ensure that assistance builds school capacity and is school-specific.

